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U.S. Still Seeks Better Links to Iran

The typhoon that has blown up over President Reagan's Iran overtures hasn't deterred the president or changed his policy. He is still quietly seeking a rapprochement with Iran's bellicose mullahs who are kindling the Middle East tinderbox and waging undeclared, underground warfare against Americans.

The White House has adopted a pattern of selective prudence, softening its statements and tempering its actions, so as not to alienate the "moderates" who may take over the levers of power when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini loses his grip.

For example, the White House was ready to recruit ex-CIA director Richard Helms, later ambassador to Iran, to coordinate its Iran strategy. But the appointment was quietly dropped because, as the American ambassador who was closest to the late shah, he would antagonize the mullahs.

We have been sorting through the jigsaw pieces for more than a year. We have a pretty good idea what has been going on behind the scenes.

According to our sources, Reagan was the angriest of Americans over Khomeini's provocations, and more than once came close to ordering a military response to Khomeini's concerted terrorist campaign.

But strategists warned the president that the unpredictable Khomeini might start blowing up oil facilities and sinking oil tankers essential to the West. One secret Pentagon scenario showed how World War III could develop from an escalation of the Iranian-American altercation. A contingency plan even called for dropping nuclear bombs on 19

"choke points" to stop a Soviet invasion of Iran and takeover of the strategic Persian Gulf.

This was sobering enough to cool Reagan's hot blood with the chill of caution. So he resorted to back channels and secret statecraft to improve relations with the mullahs.

The idea of offering arms to grease the relationship, our sources say, originated with international arms dealers who had established back channels to sell black-market arms to Iran.

Sources close to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the National Security Council officer who handled the secret Iran operation, describe him as a man of action, fiercely patriotic, who was deeply impressed by his access to the Oval Office. He not only was eager to do the president's bidding but tended, in the way of young men, to out-Reagan Reagan.

Knowing how strongly the president felt about supporting the contras in Nicaragua, our sources say, North made it his mission to carry out the president's will. When Congress refused to appropriate funds in 1984, North assured the contras, notwithstanding, that the U.S. government would support them. Later he allegedly set up secret bank accounts to siphon money from the Iranian arms payments to buy weapons for the contras.

Those who know North say he believed he was performing a patriotic service. Not a penny of the Iranian millions, they are confident, wound up in North's pocket. They are less certain, though, about the arms traffickers who sold North on the scheme.